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Newsletter of the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development

SPRING 2006

Lessons in Youth Engagement: A Report from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's 75th Anniversary Seminar

We are delighted to share some of the lessons learned about youth engagement at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's 75th Anniversary seminar, Youth Engagement: A Celebration Across Time and Culture. Coordinated by the Innovation Center, the seminar brought together a diverse community of youth activists and their adult partners from across history, culture, and social movements to share, explore and build on the lessons and experiences of youth engagement from the past to the present.

Young people from marginalized communities leading social change isn't new, but part of a long and powerful history.

Youth leadership is nothing new. The civil rights movement and the American revolution were both fueled by young activists. While many are hailing the increase in programs that meaningfully engage young people traditionally lacking power and access, we must not forget that this engagement by marginalized groups is not new but an old, wise and powerful practice. In reality, it is the mainstream leadership models that are catching up with a long history of oppressed communities working for change. And, it is the mainstream youth programming and media that is catching up on the progress made and the potential inherent in engaging disenfranchised young people in different ways. The challenge for the current generation of youth workers is to create opportunities for youth from marginalized groups to unearth and explore this history, uncover its lessons, and recreate strategies and tools for leadership that are meaningful in their lives today.



Being an “elder” has nothing to do with age and everything to do with having lessons, experiences and a willingness to share.



To quote a Chinese proverb, “to know the road ahead, ask those that are coming back.” Age does not define who is an elder; elders are simply those who have been down a path ahead and have something to teach as they come back. Young people engaged in social change have their own valuable experiences and lessons to offer to partners and allies of all ages. One elder admitted that before

the sharing of her story of leadership, she was nervous because she worried that the group would not want to hear her story. But she found a willing, interesting and perceptive audience. Inspired by a conversation with a youth participant from her community, she is now interested in finding space for other elders to share their stories with the young people in the community. Another participant stated “The fact that not only should we hear the voices of the youth, but we need to physically, verbally, and mentally acknowledge the value of their voices and the value of their strength in sharing..”

Changing the world begins with the individual

As participants shared the secrets of their success, it became clear that personal qualities and characteristics were paramount. Passion, commitment, creativity, determination, perseverance, vision, hope and trust were all “qualities for life” mentioned over and over in small and large groups. Some participants spoke of the importance of “nourishing yourself” and “personal cultivation” as key strategies for social change.

Such a large focus on these personal qualities requires us to think about how the field of youth development and engagement supports the building and strengthening of these qualities in youth and adults. More than simply a way to creatively express oneself, art can be a catalyst for change. Participants spoke of the role of music and art as international languages that bind people together and help cross boundaries. One of the elders, Ron Ellison, spoke of the importance of music in exploring his personal and civic identity and in struggling with civil rights issues as he grew up and played music in the projects of Chicago in the 1950s. As one person urged, the arts and other forms of creative expression can help you “paint your purpose and your intention.”

“Families” of choice or by birth support individuals to lead change

Family and community, partnerships and collaborations are all crucial to supporting youth engagement and positive social change. These groups, families of birth or choice, and partnerships of shared vision, all emerged as nurturing and challenging forces for positive change. Bringing individual passions, commitment, and gifts together in a group helped strengthen individuals, define dreams and propel action forward. In different ways people spoke of the culture they created with others held together by values, vision, past experience and commitment. “People want to be drawn into a group, in order to make a

difference, to equalize power and to transform conflict into healing intentional relationships,” explained one participant.

While the importance of joint work, family support and collaboration is not new, what was particularly important for the participants in this area was the emotional support, shared values, and vision that groups brought to the individual. This aspect of group work and collaboration is often relegated to secondary status as other more analytical work around stakeholder analysis, marketing and power sharing is accomplished. The seminar participants gave us a strong reminder that group work is about people, their hearts, their hopes, and their dreams.

Effective social change requires the ability to work within and across culture.

Doing the work of youth engagement for social change requires both youth and adults to cross many cultural boundaries - whether it is between ethnic cultures, the culture of youth and adults, Western and non-Western cultures, or rural and urban cultures. Participants spoke of the importance of knowing their roots, but also knowing how to appreciate and respect others and to be able to shift back and forth between cultures.

It was also important for many to clarify for themselves what is powerful in their own cultures and those they live in, but also what is oppressive. As one participant said, I “struggled with the cultural values I was raised with and new culture values... I had to overcome my own cultural issues first before I could deal with more external issues....In order for me to fit into the western culture and educational structure I have to use their way of thinking, speaking, etc. but in dealing with cross-cultures I need to figure out how to assimilate and shift back and forth.”

From the President

Young people have catalyzed and fueled social change movements throughout history and around the world. Their contributions of inspiration, creativity, and public work have laid the foundation for modern approaches to community-based problem solving, civic participation, and a range of social justice efforts that are cornerstones of our democracy. The story of youth engagement is told in many contexts: The anti-war, civil rights, immigrant rights, and indigenous language movements are rich with examples of young people who served as crucial actors in creating change.



This past year the Innovation Center was fortunate to work with the W.K Kellogg foundation to create an opportunity for intergeneration dialogue among youth and adult activists. (A paper I wrote framing the event: *Youth Engagement Across Time and Culture* also contributed to this article — [click here](#) to access an electronic copy or contact us to order a paper copy.) The result of this work, the W.K Kellogg 75th Anniversary seminar, *Youth Engagement: A Celebration Across Time and Culture*, brought together youth and adult leaders from across cultures and social movements who explored the lessons and experience of youth engagement. Participants used a multi-generational lens to reflect on and celebrate youth engagement over time, and deepen their understanding of contemporary cutting-edge work and opportunities to strengthen future youth engagement. The event provided an unprecedented opportunity to evoke cross-generational, culturally diverse wisdom, ideas, experience, and energy that generated meaning and action.

While the seminar was a wonderful event in itself, we hope that its value will continue to grow. Youth engagement can only reach its full potential as an agent of change in a multicultural, multigenerational society if it becomes more intentional, better documented, and more strongly supported. As youth and adults share lessons learned, and create visions for new engagement and growth, they will refine strategies for youth engagement such that it can become an essential, effective part of the fabric of young lives and social change movements across cultures, classes, and generations.

This newsletter highlights some of the experience, stories and results of *Youth Engagement: A Celebration Across Time and Culture*. I hope that these stories provide you with inspiration as well as concrete ideas to strengthen your own work

“Making Music to the Movement of a Moment Like This...”

Reflections from A Celebration of Youth Engagement Across Time and Culture



They came from urban neighborhoods, small towns and Native American reservations from across the U.S., with roots in communities around the world. They ranged in age from their early teens to late 60s. Over three days last October, a diverse community

of youth activists from past and present social change movements gathered in Battle Creek, MI to share strategies, develop ideas, and learn from and with one another. The event was the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s 75th Anniversary Seminar, A Celebration of Youth Engagement across Time and Culture, organized by the Innovation Center. It included youth and adult leaders from Kellogg Leadership for Community Change initiative sites nationwide.

This three-day event focused on the rhythm, relationships, and results of the past, present and future of youth engagement for positive social change. Participants shared stories and made their voices heard through art, music, and performance, contributing their passion, ideas, and strategies for change. The power of these individuals and ideas coming was palpable to all attendees as 92% reported leaving the event inspired to take action in their communities.

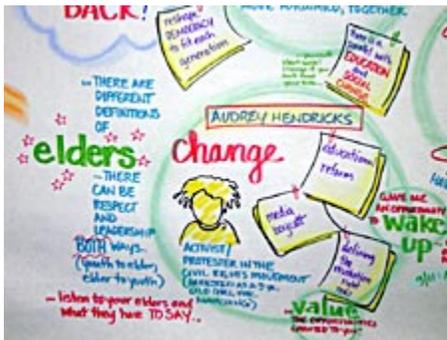


- In the “Hall of Fame,” participants displayed results and images from their work and explained their success, challenges, and passions.
- Through small group story-telling and using “Circles,” a peacemaking and restorative justice strategy developed by indigenous communities and facilitated by staff, partners, and young people from Roca, Inc., participants shared powerful stories from their past and present.
- In a “World Café” format, participants gathered in intimate groups to discuss the individual value

or “secret spice” each brought to their work and the secret ingredients of their organizations’ success.

- Through an overwhelmingly popular Open Mic session, the passions, gifts, dreams, and talents of the participants were unleashed, leading to an open, honest, and constructive discussion of ways in which the participants could carry the inspiration of three days of work to strengthen their ongoing efforts to create positive community change.

More than simply a gathering, this seminar allowed participants to connect with one another and understand how their work fits into the larger rhythm of social change. As one participant said, “I thought my work was such a novel idea. I realized that everyone was doing it. I realized there were all these organizations doing great work that I could learn from.” Participants found inspiration from one another; one participant, speaking of an elder who shared her story of leading social change as a young person, said, “She lit a fire reminding participants that there’s still a fight to be made, that there’s still a revolution to be had.



Preparing to return home, one young person said, “The movement is so powerful. I look forward to taking this back to our communities.” In partnership with the participating organizations from the event including the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change sites, the Innovation Center will continue to explore ways to help individuals and communities do just that, building on the lessons learned and strategies shared to, in the words of a young poet at the event, help make “music to the movement of a

moment like this.”

Resources from *A Celebration of Youth Engagement across Time and Culture*, including a paper framing the issue, a summary of the proceedings (from which some of this article is drawn) can be found on the Innovation Center website at www.theinnovationcenter.org.

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Calendar

[Quest for Spirit and Imagination](#) [National Association of 4-H Extension Agents](#)

Location: Milwaukee, WI

Date: October 22 – October 26, 2006

Join Innovation Center staff and partners for workshops on [evaluation](#) and [civic engagement](#).

[Leadership at the Crossroads](#) [International Leadership Association](#)

Location: Chicago, IL

Date: November 2 – 5, 2006

Innovation Center President Wendy Wheeler and Dale Nienow, Executive Director of the Center for Ethical Leadership, will share lessons from their work on [collective leadership](#) and [youth-adult partnerships](#) through the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change project

Press Corner

Organizations Involving Youth in Leadership Positions:

A Conversation with Wendy Wheeler

By Colette Kimball, M.P.H.



website at www.tpronline.org

The Prevention Researcher

Volume 12, Supplement, 2005, Pages 14-15

Wendy makes the case for the need for an Innovation Center and outlines the rewards, challenges and strategies of engaging youth, particularly disenfranchised young people, in leadership positions for The Prevention Researcher, a quarterly newsletter of research for professionals working with adolescents and at-risk youth.

Electronic copies can be accessed through the TPR



Youth Activism: *An International Encyclopedia*
Lonnie R. Sherrod, Editor

The Innovation Center-coordinated, Ford Foundation-funded Youth Leadership for Development Initiative (YLDI) is among the 160 entries related to the topic of youth activism in this extensive 2-volume set edited by Lonnie R. Sherrod with Associate Editors Constance A. Flanagan and Ron Kassimir and Assistant Editor Amy K. Syvertsen. In addition to the Innovation Center's

feature in the entries on YLDI and 4-H, Wendy Wheeler also served on the Advisory Board. Copies of the encyclopedia can be ordered at <http://www.greenwood.com/catalog/GR2811.aspx>



Bringing Generation Why Into the Fold

By April Motley
Associations Now
November 2005

Wendy offers tips, suggestions, and goals for organizations to engage younger members through full partnership and a meaningful role in governance in this publication for association executives. Copies can be found at <http://www.asaecenter.org/>

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